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French Colonies: North America

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, France's North American colonies stretched westward from the Gulf of St. Lawrence to the Great Lakes and southward from the Great Lakes to the Gulf of Mexico. The early proprietary governments gave way to a royal regime in the mid-seventeenth century, although the proprietary model was resuscitated on a limited basis in the eighteenth century. Forms of social organization varied from colony to colony, but everywhere there were new realities, belying the characterization of New France as an archaic feudal society. Economically the colonies differed from one another as well, but in general the absence of a labor-intensive staple such as tobacco or sugar precluded large-scale immigration. Recent estimates of the volume of immigration range from 33,500 for the St. Lawrence Valley to 7,000 for the Canadian Maritimes and 14,000 for Louisiana (half of them African slaves). While these figures are larger than was originally thought, the staying power of the immigrants—most often single young men from urban backgrounds—was notoriously poor. At the time of the British conquest, New France in its entirely had fewer than 100,000 European or African inhabitants, compared to nearly 2 million in British North America.

The Process of Colonization

Although there were abortive attempts to found colonies in Canada and Florida in the mid-sixteenth century, the first permanent French settlements in North America were Acadia in 1604 and Quebec in 1608. The initiative for both came from Pierre Du Gua de Monts, an officer who was then the exclusive proprietor of New France. The charter he received from Henry IV granted him seigneurial rights and a commercial monopoly over eastern North America from Philadelphia to Newfoundland, in return for which he agreed to shoulder the expenses of colonization.

De Monts abandoned the settlement of Port Royal (today Annapolis Royal in Nova Scotia) in 1607; however, French Acadia survived owing to the first subinfeudation practiced within a proprietary colony. Using his authority as proprietor, De Monts granted the land as a seigneurie to Jean Biencourt de Poutrincourt, a nobleman who had accompanied the first expedition to Port Royal. With Poutrincourt, settlement resumed and colonization entered a new phase. From the responsibility of a single overlord in possession of a commercial monopoly, it became the shared responsibility of the overlord and his seigneur. The return on the latter's investments would come not from trade but from seigneurial revenues (feudal rents collected from peasant farmers), so a successful enterprise would require agricultural settlement.

Unfortunately for the colony, Poutrincourt died a pauper in 1615, bequeathing his seigneurie to his equally impoverished son Biencourt. At Biencourt's death in 1623, Port Royal remained a trading post with no more than twenty year-round residents, none of them women.

Meanwhile the Canadian monopoly passed from de Monts, who lost it as the result of merchant complaints, to a succession of members of the upper nobility. All but one of the new proprietors (now known as viceroys) worked in tandem with a company of merchants, but colonization proceeded slowly nonetheless. In 1627, when Cardinal Richelieu revoked the most recent charter, Quebec had a total population of eighty-five, of whom only two dozen were true settlers.

Richelieu, who was anxious to transform the fledgling settlements into an important colony, created the Company of New France, more commonly known as the Company of the Hundred Associates. Differing from earlier companies in scope rather than structure, it received a perpetual monopoly on the fur trade and a fifteen-year monopoly on all other trade except the fisheries. During those fifteen years, it agreed to transport four thousand French Catholics of both sexes to New France. Yet the new proprietors experienced disastrous luck from the beginning. Their first fleet, which departed France with three hundred colonists, was captured by the British, who went on to occupy Quebec from 1629 to 1632. After the occupation, financial constraints obliged the company to subcontract the monopoly. Colonization continued under the aegis of subcontractors and seigneurs, but in 1663, when Louis XIV revoked the company's charter, New France had barely 3,500 French inhabitants. Moreover, several hundred of them lived in Acadia, under British occupation since 1654.

Louis XIV, seconded by minister Jean-Baptiste Colbert, brought the colony directly under royal administration. In the first ten years of royal control, Canada received about four thousand new colonists at the king's expense, after which funds and interest waned again. Nonetheless, New France continued to expand geographically in the first half of the eighteenth century. Acadia, returned to France by treaty in 1667, was ceded back to Britain in 1713. In reaction France moved to colonize her remaining territories in the Gulf of St. Lawrence: Cape Breton Island and Île Saint-Jean, now Prince Edward Island. At the same time, the French moved westward into the Great Lakes, founding Detroit in 1701, and southward into the Mississippi Valley. The Illinois country, an extension of the Great Lakes via the Mississippi and Illinois rivers, was the only French colony in North America established spontaneously by colonists rather than as a result of royal policy. Louisiana, on the other hand, was a royal creation designed to prevent the British or Spanish from controlling the mouth of the Mississippi. Founded in 1699 by Pierre Le Moyne d'Iberville, it was conceded to a proprietor, financier Antoine Crozat, in 1712, then transferred to John Law's Company of the Occident (later called the Company of the Indies) in 1717. The collapse of Law's system saw the return of royal rule in the 1720s as well as the transfer of the seat of government from Mobile to New Orleans.

Political Organization

New France arose coincidentally with France's absolutist state and had substantially the same architects. Both Richelieu and Colbert wanted to increase the power of France by means of a dynamic colonial empire. As a result of their attentions, New France would become a laboratory of state-of-theart political and social practices.

The government of French North America was always authoritarian. Before 1627 there were five different proprietors or viceroys, all of whom delegated their powers to the same individual in Quebec, Samuel de Champlain (c. 1567–1635). Champlain continued to administer New France until his death in 1635, in the final years as Richelieu's lieutenant. His successors (appointed by the king upon recommendation of the Hundred Associates) gained the formal title of governor of New France. There were also regional governors in Acadia, Three Rivers, and Montreal, the latter appointed by the Notre Dame Society, the missionary organization that founded the settlement and served as its seigneur. Finally, in 1647 the crown established a Council in Quebec consisting of the governor general, the governor of Montreal, and the Jesuit superior; it was expanded to seven members the following year.

With the imposition of royal rule in 1663, the government acquired the contours it would retain until the end of the French regime. The king appointed not only a governor general whose primary tasks were military and diplomatic, but an intendant responsible for civil administration. A new Sovereign Council (later called Superior Council) became the highest court in the land. It brought together the governor general, the intendant, the bishop, and five (later seven, then twelve) additional councillors. In theory the authority of the governor general and intendant extended beyond the St. Lawrence, but as New France expanded, the outlying colonies gained de facto administrative independence. In Île Royale (Cape Breton) and Louisiana the governors took orders directly from France, the *commissaires ordonnateurs* were intendants in all but name, and the Superior Councils filled the same function as the council in Quebec.

Because venality of office did not exist in New France, all high-level administrators served at the king's pleasure. The colonial government was thus a purer expression of French absolutism than its metropolitan counterpart. Some historians have judged this regime harshly for stifling freedom and initiative, while others have praised its efficiency and paternalism. Yet it is noteworthy how often arbitrary power worked, in the colonial context, to level the traditional orders of the *ancien régime.* Indeed, many administrative decisions reflect the almost physiocratic repugnance for intermediary bodies and paternalist regulation that historians associate with enlightened despotism.

Colonial Society

Traditionally, historians portrayed New France as a backward feudal society, but that interpretation has been challenged, or at least qualified significantly, in recent decades. To be sure the three estates—clergy, nobility, and commons—were recognized in French North America, but privilege was largely meaningless there since even commoners owed no taxes. Social advancement could also be more rapid in the colonies. Nicolas Juchereau, the son of a merchant turned Canadian seigneur, acceded to the nobility in 1692, a century before his cousins in the French branch of the family. In the St. Lawrence Valley, the seigneurial system did siphon off a larger part of the agricultural surplus as time went on. On the other hand, seigneurialism in Acadia existed largely on paper before succumbing to British occupation. There was no seigneurial system and virtually no agriculture on Île Royale, while Louisiana and the Illinois country had plantations worked by African and Indian slaves.

Despite their seigneurs, Canadian habitants (a term adopted by colonial farmers to distinguish themselves from mere peasants) managed to speculate in land, practice a highly individualist agriculture, and even occasionally achieve upward social mobility. In the towns tradesmen were free to pursue their own interest, since there were no guilds, and corporatist association was strictly limited. New France boasted a number of successful businesswomen, not all of them widows or religious.

New France was also a multicultural society. There were reserves for Christian Indians right in the heart of the St. Lawrence Valley, where domiciled Indians made up about 10 percent of the colonial population. Several hundred slaves of either Indian or African origin labored in Montreal, as did hundreds of captives taken from the British colonies during the French and Indian Wars.

Beyond the St. Lawrence Valley, much of New France remained, in essence, Native-controlled territory. In the Great Lakes, French sovereignty was represented only by the young agricultural settlement at Detroit, together with widely scattered trading, missionary, and military outposts. Although Louisiana had a population of four thousand Europeans and five thousand Africans by the mid-eighteenth century, at that time there were still some seventy thousand Indians living in the lower Mississippi Valley. Intercultural relations were numerous and are symbolized by the *coureurs de bois,* French fur traders who ventured into Indian country to obtain their wares. Numbering in the hundreds as early as the 1680s, the *coureurs de bois* were Frenchmen who voluntarily adopted an Indian way of life. During their voyages they relied upon Native technologies, Native languages, and the services (sexual as well as economic) of Native women. It was the *coureurs de bois* who initiated French settlement in the Illinois country, through their marriages to Indian women beginning in the 1690s.

Economic Development and Immigration

Despite the importance of the fur trade (a vogue for felt hats created demand for beaver pelts in Europe), New France never met the economic expectations of its promoters. Neither fur nor cod, the other Canadian staple, required a large colonial labor force, so from the outset transporting immigrants was a financial liability rather than a source of profit. Only when the state or state-supported companies intervened did immigration attain significant proportions. Even then the rate of permanent settlement was low, so demographic growth was gradual. In the absence of large colonial populations, agricultural and industrial development occurred slowly, limiting demand for further immigration.

At Richelieu's behest, the Company of the Hundred Associates arranged for the passage of an estimated 7,300 people to New France, probably 4,700 to the St. Lawrence Valley and 2,600 to Acadia. Many of them, however, moved on to other destinations, roughly half of those sent to the St. Lawrence and nearly everyone in Acadia. While the unstable political situation was a factor, especially in Acadia, so was the nature of the labor supply. Apart from a few of the seigneurs, who recruited in situ among people known to them in France, most of the company's recruiting agents worked out of La Rochelle, Dieppe, or Rouen, major towns with large populations of single migrant laborers. What historians call "metropolitan migration," the sort least likely to have staying power, clearly predominated in this migration stream. (The typical metropolitan migrant was a young urban tradesman seeking employment.)

The immigrants of the period 1663–1673 included eight hundred marriageable women, recruited largely from charity hospitals. Thanks to these *filles du roi* (king's daughters), the immigrant sex ratio became more balanced, fostering population growth through natural increase. In the eighteenth century, most royal recruits for Canada were either soldiers or prisoners. The St. Lawrence Valley received perhaps 33,500 immigrants in all, of whom no more than 10,000 founded families in the colony. An estimated 7,000 French immigrants passed through the Canadian Maritimes, yet today's Acadians descend from only a few hundred founding families.

In Louisiana, John Law's Company of the Occident pursued the most dynamic immigration policy in the history of New France. From 1717 to 1720, it deported over 1,400 men and women from prisons and large cities, where they had been arrested as vagabonds. Although deportations ceased in response to riots against "Louisiana slavery" (an ironic reference since the first African slaves were also shipped to Louisiana in these years—two thousand between 1719 and 1721), the company blanketed France with propaganda promoting immigration. The campaign had limited success there due to the colony's already poor reputation in the Atlantic ports that were the natural reservoirs of colonial migration. On the other hand, translated into German, Law's brochures created a sensation in the Rhine Valley, where four thousand people packed their bags for Louisiana. These recruits were "provincial migrants" fleeing rural areas

undergoing agricultural modernization. They were more likely to travel in families and, like religious refugees, more apt to settle than footloose urban laborers. Had Richelieu and Louis XIV been as tolerant of foreigners and Protestants as the Company of the Occident, perhaps the return rate of immigrants to Canada would have been lower.

By the mid-eighteenth century, the St. Lawrence Valley was a land of self-sufficient family farms that exported surplus wheat to Île Royale and the Caribbean. Acadian farms were also prosperous, although they no longer belonged to New France. Illinois farmers, who produced foodstuffs for Louisiana, used the labor of African slaves, as did Louisiana's fledgling tobacco and indigo plantations. Yet most of Louisiana's small population still participated in the frontier exchange economy, a patchwork of commercial and subsistence endeavors. The most vigorous colonial economy was that of Île Royale, whose capital, Louisbourg, quickly became both a major base for the North Atlantic fishery and a busy entrepôt in the triangular trade among Europe, North America, and the West Indies, in rivalry with New England.

British Conquest

After the loss of Acadia to Britain in 1713, the next military setback for New France occurred during the War of the Austrian Succession (1740–1748). In 1745 New England forces, with the help of the Royal Navy, laid siege to Louisbourg, which surrendered after a seven-week bombardment. Although Île Royale was returned to France by treaty in 1748, New Englanders were furious, and their complaints helped bring about an all-out British offensive against New France during the Seven Years' War (1756–1763).

The most controversial act of the conquest was actually a prelude to it. In 1755 the British expropriated and deported the Acadians, despite their declared neutrality. Some deportees landed in England, while others were scattered across the thirteen colonies. More than one thousand victims of this *Grand Dérangement* (Great Disturbance) eventually made their way to Louisiana after the war.

Louisbourg fell a second time in 1758, and Quebec followed suit after the Battle of the Plains of Abraham, a dramatic but successful gamble on the part of British commander James Wolfe, in 1759. By the Treaty of Paris (1763), the French ceded Louisiana to Spain and the rest of New France to Britain. They retained only fishing rights on the Newfoundland coast and two tiny islands, St. Pierre and Miquelon, in the Gulf of St. Lawrence. Today these two islands, still under French sovereignty, are all that remains of France's empire in North America.

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